

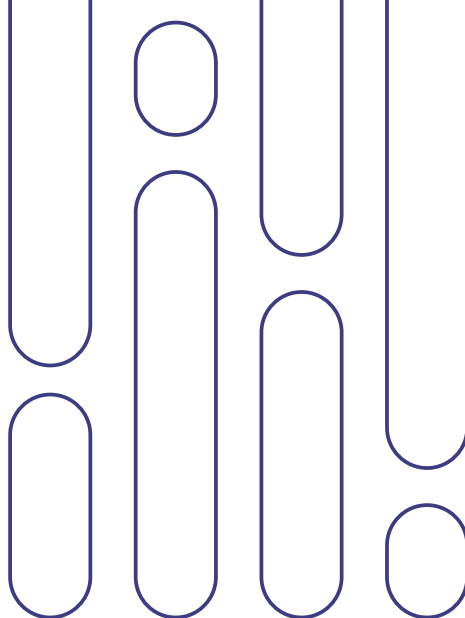
POSITION PAPER

A Strike Into Iran's Depth: Dimensions of the Drone Attacks on Iran

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A series of massive explosions rocked several military facilities in Isfahan, 350 kilometers from Tehran, on the night of January 28, 2023, exposing how far Iranian institutions are incapable of protecting their key military sites. An explosion struck Tohid Ammunition Manufacturing Factory of the Ministry of Defense and Nuclear Fuel Research and Production Center (run by the Ministry of Defense). Meanwhile, a second explosion targeted Iranian drone manufacturing and storage facilities. The third allegedly targeted nuclear facilities. The explosions were allegedly carried out by Israeli drones.

Iran's Ministry of Defense claimed to have intercepted one of the three drones, while defense traps successfully shot down the other two. A building suffered minor damage as a result of the attacks. The Ministry of Defense also revealed in an official statement that the damage caused by the explosions was minor, with no casualties reported. As a result, the ministry declared the explosions a failure. This position paper seeks to provide a reading of the dimensions, significations and parties involved in the explosions, as well as the future of the face-off between Iran and Israel.

An Attack on Iran Amid Internal and External Tensions

In terms of timing, the military attacks on Iran can be associated with several important developments and issues, primarily the following:

- **The stalled Vienna talks, Iran's enhanced nuclear capabilities and proximity to the nuclear threshold:** The Vienna talks ceased in September 2022 when the parties involved

were about to reach an understanding on a roadmap through which the nuclear deal would be resuscitated. Instead of pursuing the diplomatic path to end the nuclear standoff, Iran has taken several steps to move closer to the nuclear threshold. In its latest report in November 2022, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) acknowledged that Iran had increased its enriched uranium stockpiles and its officials continued to face obstacles in inspecting and monitoring Iranian nuclear sites. A separate report also accused Iran of refusing to cooperate with the IAEA in its probe regarding the uranium traces found at three undeclared nuclear facilities. Such reports did not hinder Iran from taking more steps to reach the nuclear threshold and producing a nuclear bomb when it deems it appropriate to do so. These Iranian steps sparked concern among regional and global powers, particularly the United States, whose president did not rule out the military option against Iran in case diplomacy, pressures and sanctions failed.

• **Iran's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war and the shift in US and European positions:** The ambiguity surrounding the nuclear issue, as well as Iran's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war alongside Russia —supplying Moscow with drones and military advisers — caused a significant shift in US and European positions. Europe and the United States have increased their coordination to develop a unified policy to counter Iran and hold it accountable. The United States has begun to consider alternatives to diplomacy, which had been adhered to by the Biden administration for nearly two years; since Biden took office. European countries have also reinstated a policy of sanctions against Iran, thus establishing a transatlantic consensus on imposing additional sanctions on Iran.

- **Netanyahu's return to power and the internal crises threatening his government's survival:** Iran and Israel are engaged in a large-scale shadow war as well as an unceasing conflict that is raging regionally and globally. There is no doubt that such a tense atmosphere, combined with Iran's hostile behavior, created the conditions for the extremist right-wing Netanyahu government to partake in these attacks on Iran. These attacks are consistent with Israel's intensive campaign calling for pressure on Iran and countering its hostile policies, especially given that Netanyahu's government adopts a tough position on Iran's nuclear program and has reservations about the nuclear deal in general. Moreover, given that the Israeli government faces fragility on the domestic front, it benefits from directing the Israeli populace to focus on external matters.

- **A critical moment that exacerbates Iran's crisis and exposes its failure:** The attacks occurred at a time when the Iranian government is gripped by widespread domestic protests following the death of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini at the hands of its morality police. These protests reflect the political system's diminishing legitimacy and failures. The attacks also occurred at a time when Khamenei was preparing to participate in a military hardware exhibition, which included drones, putting the Iranian government and its senior leaders in an awkward position.

The Party Involved in the Attacks and the Objectives It Seeks to Achieve

So far, Iran's Ministry of Defense has not revealed who was responsible for the series of explosions that targeted sensitive mil-

itary facilities in Isfahan. However, the finger of blame points to Israel, given the following:

- **The Israeli media's claims that the Israeli army was behind the explosions:** Israeli authorities usually do not disclose the operations carried out against Iran. Nonetheless, Israeli media outlets quoted unnamed Israeli or US intelligence officials as saying that the Israeli army had carried out the surgical military operations deep into Iranian territory. The Jerusalem Post quoted sources as saying that the explosions were successful despite the Iranian claims, given the depth of the explosions and the videos circulating on social media platforms. "The logic of war is deadly and intolerable, and the warlord and his accomplices are forced to compensate," said Mykhailo Podolyak, advisor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, raising Tehran's suspicions about Kyiv-Tel Aviv's possible involvement in the attacks. Iran responded through the Supreme National Security Council, claiming that Kyiv's refusal to deny responsibility confirms that it was an accomplice in the attacks. The council reiterated that ["unless Kyiv officially announces it has no hand in the attacks"](#), it must be prepared to accept the consequences of its irresponsible position."

- **Iran's previous accusations leveled against Tel Aviv of being behind similar attacks:** Iranian authorities previously accused Israel of being behind several explosions that hit sensitive Iranian positions and targeted influential figures such as the nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Tehran also accused Tel Aviv of the April 2021 attack on the Natanz site, which disrupted energy supplies and severely damaged a number of centrifuges. The attack occurred during the visit of the US secretary of defense to Israel. In July 2022, Tehran announced the arrest

of a group of saboteurs working for Israel who were planning to blow up a sensitive defense industrial center (which it did not specify) in Isfahan.

• **Consecutive Israeli threats to carry out preemptive strikes against Iran:** Israel has long been expressing its desire to carry out a military operation against Iran in case the nuclear talks between Iran and the West fail to salvage the 2015 nuclear deal. Israel seeks to prevent Iran from acquiring the technological know-how to develop a nuclear weapon that would pose an existential threat to it. Israel considers the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran, or any Middle Eastern country, a threat to its existence. Israel's main struggle in the region is all about survival and existence.

As mentioned, mounting evidence suggests Israel's involvement along with Ukraine in a spate of bombings, with Tel Aviv the main beneficiary. There are also considerations related to the calculus of regional powers and their efforts to maximize their regional and global standing and clout on the one hand while at the same time diminishing the strength and standing of rivals competing with them for regional leadership and dominance. Thus, Israel may have sought to achieve the following objectives through the recent spate of attacks on Iran:

– **Ushering in a new era of Israeli right-wing escalation against Iran:** The Israeli government wanted to emphasize that its military escalation against Iran has reached a new, more decisive and resolute phase, especially following Netanyahu's re-assumption of office in the country. Netanyahu's electoral platform included more extreme policies and directives against Iran, its nuclear program and armed militias deployed in Syria and its other spheres of influence, particularly those deemed to

threaten Israel's existence. Netanyahu sought through the attacks to reaffirm his commitment to the promises included in his electoral platform on the one hand, and demonstrate Israel's ability to strike deep into Iran's territory on the other. This is in addition to maintaining Israel's superiority over its neighbors, especially given that Netanyahu wants to demonstrate to his domestic rivals that he is the strongman that Israel has always known and needs at this current time.

– **Making Iran appear as a weak country through breaching its security:** Netanyahu has reinstated his old policy toward Iran, especially attempting to portray it as a weak country in the eyes of Iranians at home and abroad through breaching its security. These attacks deep into Iranian territory aimed to expose the Iranian establishment in front of the Iranian people and the world, calling into question its claims of possessing extensive capabilities that allow it to extend the scope of its clout across the region while being unable to defend its domestic front. These attacks further erode the government's reputation and add to the domestic crises it is facing while it continues to pursue destructive external policies and continues to invest heavily in its nuclear and ballistic missile programs at the expense of the Iranian public's welfare.

– **The message behind targeting drone manufacturing facilities:** Assuming the reported Ukrainian link to the attacks is true, Israel and Ukraine aimed to send a message to Iran that its drone industry is now a target, and it will pay the price for supplying Russia with drones in its war on Ukraine, which tipped the scales in Moscow's favor at the start of the crisis. Iran also supports Russia's defiance of international norms imposed since the end of the Cold War. Under Netanyahu and his right-

wing extremist government, Israel wants to restrain Iran and counter its growing advancement in the drone industry, which will play a critical role in the future of several wars and battles around the world.

– **Targeting sensitive military targets in Isfahan:** Israel specifically targeted Isfahan because of its enormous military importance to the Iranian leadership. The city is home to sensitive military installations. It is home to a massive air base as well as a number of nuclear facilities, including the Natanz site, which is at the heart of Iran's uranium enrichment program. The Tohid facility, one of Iran's most important drone manufacturing facilities, is also located in Isfahan. It also houses F-14 fighter planes and a nuclear fuel production facility. In addition, Isfahan is the site of several nuclear research facilities, including a uranium enrichment center. Iran had previously informed the IAEA that some nuclear activities carried out at the Karaj nuclear facility until June 2021 were relocated to Isfahan. Overall, Isfahan is known as Iran's beating heart.

The Attacks' Results and Significations

Based on the foregoing, several conclusions can be drawn, the most important of which are:

- **A US green light to Israel:** The attacks would not have been carried out without prior approval from the United States to target a number of military and civilian installations in Iran. The attacks were preceded by military drills simulating a US-Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. The attacks coincided with the CIA director's visit to Tel Aviv. As a result, these attacks send an implicit message to Iran that military action against it

is not out of the question. According to media reports, the United States was also involved in the operation.

- **A message of warning and deterrence to Iran:** The attacks included military targets suspected of serving nuclear purposes, sending a clear message to the Iranian government that its efforts to acquire a nuclear weapon will not be tolerated. The attacks may have also targeted drone and missile manufacturing facilities, with the goal of limiting Iran's efforts to support Russia in its war against Ukraine. After the attacks, the Ukrainian president's advisor commented, "The attack on sites in Isfahan is directly related to the war in our country."

- **Ramping up the campaign of pressures and sanctions on Iran:** Other explosions occurred at oil facilities in conjunction with the mentioned attacks. This is consistent with the US and European desire to increase pressure on Iran, particularly by obstructing its oil exports, which have steadily increased since Biden took office, to discourage Iran from its hostile behavior and bring it back to the negotiating table. This is in addition to targeting sites that may be linked to the production or storage of drones supplied by Iran to Russia, which are targeting Ukrainian infrastructure.

- **Dealing a blow to the Iranian government's legitimacy at home:** While the government responds to the protest movement with repression, excessive violence and executions, these attacks have made it appear as incapable of confronting its external enemies, who undermine its security and stability and target its military infrastructure in the eyes of its people. This is quite damning given that the attacks were carried out by Israel, the Iranian government's arch foe in the region. These attacks were preceded by several other attacks that also called

into question the government's capabilities and proved that its allegations of resilience, defiance and confrontations are nothing but hollow rhetoric.

The Future of the Iran-Israel Face-off

Given the tense situation in Iran as well as in its neighboring sphere, several scenarios could play out in the aftermath of these attacks:

- **The crisis escalating into a direct confrontation between Iran and Israel:** This scenario sees Israel's and Iran's conflict entering a new phase of escalation and direct confrontation. The two sides will conduct operations and strikes deep into each other's territory. Perhaps the United States will be part of this confrontation.

This scenario is supported by internal crises in both countries, which may encourage their respective leaders to export their crises abroad to avoid domestic obligations (to the electorate) and popular pressures. In this context, Iran may instruct its proxy actors, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah, to target specific Israeli positions. Furthermore, this scenario is backed up by Iran's faltering diplomacy and the deadlock in talks to resurrect the nuclear deal, with Tehran exceeding Israeli and US red-lines in terms of getting closer to the nuclear threshold. This is in addition to concerns about Iranian efforts to strengthen its dominance through possessing an unconventional weapon that could tip the regional balance of power, not to mention the US statement about preparing for a military confrontation with Iran and military preparations for such an option, such as the recent military drills with Israel that simulated operations

against Iran. On the other side, some Iranian parties accused Israel of carrying out the attacks. Websites close to the IRGC have spoken about “preparing for retaliation,” which could lead to a wider confrontation.

Iran ignoring the attacks and remaining calm: In this scenario, Iran will not rush to respond in order to prevent a large-scale escalation that could lead to a direct confrontation or broaden the scope of the indirect confrontation. Perhaps Iran will completely disregard the attacks, especially given that, according to the Iranian narrative, only minor damage was caused to the targeted facilities and there were no casualties. As a result, in light of this scenario, Iran will be content with issuing threats to Israel, as it has done in the past.

This scenario is supported by the current situation in Iran as well as the domestic turmoil that could arise if it engages in a major confrontation with Israel and possibly with the United States. This is in addition to the international pressures Iran is under in a variety of files and contexts including the stalled nuclear talks and Western accusations of Iranian involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war. Iran is also concerned about being dragged into a war with the United States and Israel. Following such attacks in the past, Iran’s response was indirect, not tied to a specific timeframe, and with no claim of responsibility.

• **Escalation in the context of the shadow war between the two sides:** This scenario sees the two sides continuing the shadow war and indirect confrontation, which include naval, ground, aerial and cyberspace assaults. Such exchanges have varied over the past three years, oscillating between escalation and calm depending on events and developments. In this con-

text, Iran could respond to the Israeli attacks by conducting attacks using drones deep into the occupied territories from Syria or Lebanon where its proxies are deployed. Iran could also conduct cyberattacks against Israel or target its ships in international waters.

What makes this scenario possible is the fact that if a direct confrontation breaks out, it will be costly and no one will know when or how it will end. In addition, such types of responses have been used by the two sides in the past decades, and they have become part of their respective strategies. They provide mutual deterrence while enabling each side to deny responsibility.

For the time being, it appears that the shadow war is the more realistic option for the two sides. This means that Israel and Iran will continue to engage in reciprocal attacks without explicitly claiming responsibility until Iran breaches the nuclear threshold, a point at which the United States' and Israel's approach to Iran will change dramatically.

